DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 230 CS 210 607

AUTHOR Lazier-Smith, Linda
TITLE A Pilot Study of Personal Classified Ads Appearing in Capital-City Daily Newspapers: The Kinds, the Guidelines, the Trends.
PUB DATE Aug 87
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (70th, San Antonio, TX, August 1-4, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advertising; *Interpersonal Communication; Interpersonal Relationship; Media Research; *Newspapers; Persuasive Discourse; *Policy; Self Evaluation (Individuals); Social Attitudes; *Social Behavior; *Social Networks
IDENTIFIERS *Classified Advertising; Media Use

ABSTRACT

A pilot study examined trends in the appearance of personal advertisements (individuals seeking dates/mates) in the classified columns of daily newspapers located in state capital cities, as well as newspaper guidelines for the acceptance of personal ads. Daily newspapers in the capital city of each state and some of the larger nationally important newspapers (such as the "New York Times" and the "Miami Herald") were surveyed and also asked to provide their guidelines for the regulation of personal ads. In addition, three different issues of each paper were requested for a content analysis of the personal classifieds. Responses were provided by 40 newspapers--29 of which do run personal ads. Results indicated that the leading category of personals was dating/mating by individuals, with dating clubs in second place, followed by escort/adult entertainment, religious, and psychic personals. Most of the guidelines for date/mate ads dealt with wording and with attempts to encourage healthy relationships. Findings suggest that newspapers are mirroring a trend already apparent in magazines. Findings also suggest that newspaper consumers of the 1980s are using their daily newspapers as a replacement for the recognized social institutions, such as churches, clubs, and taverns, where they can meet friends and companions. (References are attached.) (NKA)

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# A PILOT STUDY OF PERSONAL CLASSIFIED ADS APPEARING IN CAPITAL-CITY DAILY NEWSPAPERS: THE KINDS, THE GUIDELINES, THE TRENDS

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By
Linda Lazier-Smith
Assistant Professor
School of Journalism
242 W. 18th Ave.
The Ohio State University
Columbus, OH 43210
614-292-1319

CS210607

Presented at the Special Topics Session of the Advertising Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication 1987 annual conference, San Antonio, Texas.

# A PILOT STUDY OF PERSONAL CLASSIFIED ADS APPEARING IN CAPITAL-CITY DAILY NEWSPAPERS: THE KINDS, THE GUIDELINES, THE TRENDS


## ABSTRACT

This pilot study examines trends in the appearance of personal advertisements (individuals seeking dates/mates) in the classified columns of daily newspapers located in state capital cities. Of the 40 respondents, 72 percent do run personals, with the largest category being by individuals for dates. Newspaper guidelines for ad acceptance are also reported.


Abraham Lincoln used them. "Wanted: young skinny wiry fellows not under 18. Must be expert riders willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred." (One of those who answered became Pony Express rider William "Buffalo Bill" Cody.) (3)

Andrew Jackson found the classifieds to serve a duel purpose: he used them to challenge the man who slurred Mrs. Jackson. (3) Alvah Roebuck met Richard Sears through them and Walt Disney met his first cartooning job (1) in the "little ads," which were first grouped together in 1830 by the New York Sun. (1)

Since then, classified advertisements have grown to a $8.3 billion business, accounting for a third of all newspaper advertisng revenues. (2)

Though small, these ads are considered powerful and even prophetic, being called "one of the major barometers of the economic climate." (3) Indeed, the mouthpiece of the newspaper industry, Editor and Publisher, has said that "pieced together, the 'little ads' probably tell us more about our wants and needs, more about our everyday lives, than the big story on Page One." (1) They foretell employment, automotive and housing trends, often before the "real" economic indicators. Perhaps they also can point

to other trends of everyday existence. Perhaps the agate ads can gauge the true social climate -- or some of the heat of it -- as well as the economic climate.

Personal Classifieds

Personal classified advertisements, particularly those seeking companions, have been much in the news in recent years, but in the news more in relation to magazines than to newspapers. Indeed, Lincoln's ad today might read "YSWF" (for "young skinny wiry fellows") in order to fit in with all the attractive and sincere SWFs, DBMs and GWMs ads that appear in all kinds of publications, from upscale city magazines to singles publications to the New York Review of Books, Village Voice, National Review or Chicago Tribune.

Although such personal ads are fastly moving into the mainstream, they still carry stigma. However, studies of magazine ads indicate that the advertisers are not MIss Lonely Hearts nurds ("pathetic loser seeks same") or necessarily a "string of adjectives held together by a box number." (4) An article in New York magazine explained:

> Though the personals still attract very disparate types, from prisoners in search of pen pals to executives in search of extramarital affairs, they are increasingly filled with people looking for a relationship. And according to a Village Voice survey, those people tend to fall into three professional categories: doctors, lawyers, and dentists. Those who respond tend to be similarly upscale. A recent ad in New York drew responses from four surgeons, ten lawyers, five college professors, two executives from ABC and Time Inc., a psychiatrist, two journalists, and a foreign-policy adviser. 'They're the people your mother always wanted you to bring home,' says Evans (Village Voice publisher). (4)

The typical Village Voice male who placed personal ads in 1983 made $35,000; the typical female salary was $29,000. The average VV woman gets 50 replies; the male, 13.(6) The Voice is the acknowledged original matchmaker, having run personals for 30 years, although in its alternative beginnings ads were geared to people with odd sexual inclinations.(4) Within the past

seven years, these have been largely supplanted by more-conventional ads that even use such previous no-no words of "commitment" and "children." Other changes over the years include a fear of casual sex that has led to phrases such as "I'm clean" or "controlled herpes." (4)

Still, as Time writer Lance Morrow says, "anyone composing a personal ad faces an inherent credibility problem. While we are accustomed to the self-promotion of politicians, say, we sense something bizarre when ordinary people erupt in small rhapsodies of self-celebration that are occasioned by loneliness and longing. One is haunted by almost piteous cries that come with post-office-box number attached: 'Is there anyone out there? Anyone out there for me?'" (5)

The anyones do appear to be out there as evidenced by the ads in the mentioned magazines. Are the ads and the anyones also appearing in the nation's daily print medium, the newspaper?

Little in the literature addresses the topic, nor do the executives with the Newspaper Advertising Bureau or the Association of Newspaper Classified Advertising Managers, who acknowledge that the ads do exist, but without any quantitative data. This study is a pilot attempt at a remedy.

## PRESENT STUDY - METHODOLOGY

To investigate trends of personal classified advertisements in U.S. daily newspapers, a survey (see Appendix 1) was sent to daily newspapers in the capital city of each state plus some of the larger national newspapers including the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Dallas Morning News, Detroit Free Press, St. Petersburg Times, Miami Herald News and USA Today.

Each newspaper classified advertising manager was asked to complete the survey and also to provide any guidelines used to regulate classified ads, particularly personal ads. Three issues of the paper for the dates

October 14, October 16 and October 18, 1986 (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday) were also requested for a content analysis of the personal classifieds.

The cover letter defined personal classifieds as those for individual dating, for escort services, religious messages, psychic services and the like. The questionnaire was pretested at the researcher's hometown daily (a capital city paper). Sixty surveys were mailed; 40 newspapers replied by deadline for a 67 percent response rate. Thirty provided tearsheets; 16 returned written policies.

Results of the survey were tabulated; contents of the guidelines were "tabulated" as possible and the classified sections were content analyzed for frequency and types of "personal" ads.

## LIMITATIONS

Developed as a pilot study geared to monitor possible trends, this study encountered the natural problems of content analysis under 40 separate systems of headings, placement and acceptance policies. Coding was difficult since ads were sometimes clumped under one central heading ("Personals" or "Information") and sometimes were broken out into several separate headings ("Companions," "Escorts," "Dating Services," etc.). Analysis of the guidelines suffered from the same dilemma of various wordings for limitations. The analysis, therefore, took on the schizophrenic qualities of half quantitative/half qualitative assessment.

Even with these problems, the study represents the first apparent attempt to look at the contents of the personals section of daily newspapers and is the grist for drawing at least some conclusions about the contents of these influential daily newspapers at this point in time and in light of the activity occuring in magazine classified columns.

Future studies will suffer from the same difficulties since the "lurking" variables, if you will, lurk within the framework of the individual

newspapers and cannot be designed out of the study.

## FINDINGS

### Summary in brief

The responding newspapers do run personal ads of all types, with the most frequent kind being those for individuals seeking mates, for dating clubs or services and for religious messages. Newspapers run such ads under guidelines and they tend to run them under the headings of "personals" most often, or under multiple and invidual headings. Most require prepayment, as they do for other types of classifieds. Nearly all newspapers polled have rejected some kinds of personal ads.

### The Survey

Of the 40 responding newpapers, 29 (72%) currently have personal classifieds running. Of the 11 who don't, most say it is simply against advertising policy. Eleven newspapers (32%) say the amount of such ads has increased in quantity, generally, over the past year or two.

The kinds of personals run and the number of papers that run them include:

| Category | Number |
|---|---|
| Seeking dates/mates (by individuals) | 23 (79% of papers accepting personals) |
| Religious | 23 |
| Dating clubs, services | 22 |
| "Other" | 15 |
| Psychics, palmists, etc. | 13 |
| Escort services | 5 |

Eighty-five percent (N=34) of the newspapers have special "personal classifieds policies" although only 16 returned a written guideline. Another 15 described their policies/procedures on the survey sheets.

Some 79% of the papers that accept personal ads of any nature accept those for dating by individuals.

Most run a variety of personals under a "personals" heading, although

the dating/companion ones also fell under such headings as Introduction Services, People Meeting People, Dating Services, Friendship, Companion Corner, Only Hearts or Singles Clubs.

Three-fourths of the accepting papers required prepayment of personal classifieds, although 17 (58%) also required prepayment for other types of classifieds. Most charge the same rate for personal ads as for other classifieds, only three charged more and five charged less.

Nearly all respondents (N=38, 95%) claim to have rejected personals, most for failing to meet guidelines/policies. Another nine claim to have received complaints from community groups or individuals about personal classifieds, although some of the affirmative responses included complaints from persons wanting to run such ads, not from individuals damning what was already running.

The demographics of the responding papers follow:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Circulation: | Under 25,000 | 7 |
| | 25,001-49,999 | 2 |
| | 50,000-99,999 | 6 |
| | 100,000-249,999 | 14 |
| | Over 250,000 | 10 |
| Publication: | A.M. paper | 18 |
| | P.M. paper | 4 |
| | Both | 16 |
| Ownership: | Chain | 14 |
| | Family | 10 |
| Advertising ratio: | to 49% | 5 |
| | 50-59% | 8 |
| | 60-69% | 15 |
| | Other | 5 |
| | No ans. | 7 |
| Politics: | Republican | 6 |
| | Democrat | 7 |
| | Independent | 14 |
| | No ans. | 13 |

Surveys were not received from 16 states: Connecticut, Maryland, New Jersey, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Nebraska, North Dakota, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina and South Carolina.

The Content Analysis of the Ads

Content analysis of the ads was a difficult task, to say the least. Not only were original categories hard to construct, but several that came compliments of overall "personals" headings were not particularly of interest to this study, including those lumped together and including athletic tickets wanted or available, child care, food products, special exhibits, credit and money ventures and the like. Therefore, it was decided to count only those falling under the personals of interest: dating/mating by individuals, dating clubs/services, escort and adult entertainment opportunities, spas, religious ads and those for psychic services. It was decided that these most mirrored the types appearing in magazines and had most to say about our true "social selves."

Of these categories, the leading kind of personal ads were the dating/mating by individuals, with 369 in print over the 3-day period for the 30 coded papers. This was true even though nine of the papers that accepted personal ads in general refused such individual pleas for dates/mates.

Dating clubs came in second at 267. Escort/adult entertainment was third with 131; religious followed close with 110, then psychic at 81.

Counted Ads -- 3-Day Analysis

| Category | Number |
|---|---|
| Date/mate (by individuals) | 369 |
| Dating clubs | 267 |
| Escort/adult entertainment | 131 |
| Religious | 110 |
| Psychic | 81 |
| Spa | 10 |

Ads for dating/mating tended to appear in big-city, large-circulation newspapers; smaller papers reported little demand. Virtually all of the escort service ads appeared in just two newspapers -- in Austin, Texas and Columbus, Ohio. Dallas carried the most religious ads (36% of the total); of all

religious ads, those thanking St. Jude for favors granted were overwhelmingly the category leader. Dallas also led in number of psychic ads (41% of the total).

Qualitatively, there were a number of interesting "findings": the Los Angeles Tiems had quite a few "Oriental" dating services with such clubs touting "East meets West Club. Many attractive Oriental ladies."

Ads in the Salt Lake City Tribune and the Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch were the most lively and had the most unusual types. Salt Lake City, for example, carried quite a few for divorces, which seems rather unusual in such a strong Mormon territory.

Few papers accepted gay ads although the Arizona Republic had two gay dating clubs. The Denver Post, on the other hand, offered an extreme amount of love-over-the-phone-lines via a "Conversations" section with the following types of ads:

> "The Screamer. (phone number)."
> Live Love Line, adutls only, 75¢ first minute."
> "The Luuv (sic) Line, adults only, 75¢ first minute, special 2 calls, $29."

The Guidelines/Policies

Sixteen respondents returned written policy guidelines; another 15 described policies on the survey forms. Content analysis of the written guidelines was difficult but produced some similarities, mostly for the individual dating ads:

| | |
|---|---|
| Ads subject to editorial approval | 11 newspapers |
| No phone number | 9 |
| No address | 9 |
| No last name | 8 |
| No swingers (multiple partners) | 8 |
| No dates/mates | 5 |
| No lewd wording | 7 |
| Prepaid only | 8 |

Others included no gay, no spouse swapping, nothing illegal, no travel companions, no housing offers, no business deals, no gold diggers, no matri-

monial, no phones, no age.

While 14 of the 30 papers showed no date/mate ads during content analysis, only five prohibited such ads in the written guidelines, although nine prohibited it when those who noted policies on the surveys were included.

Most of the guidelines about date/mate ads dealt with wording and attempts to encourage healthy relationships. Some, for example, refuse any from married or newly-separated persons but from bonafide singles only. Most newspapers require that dating services/clubs or adult entertainment enterprises be properly licensed prior to the ad being accepted. This was also true for many of the psychic services.

The newspaper with the most extensive policies regarding "Advertising Standards of Acceptance" was the St. Petersburg Times, which outlines its policies and procedures in a 24-page detailed report that covers every imaginable advertising question including blood donors, DMSO, baldness and hair replacement, organ donors, personal defense items and talent agencies, just to name a few. The Times takes no lonely hearts or dating ads. Commented the classified advertising manager on the back of the survey:

> I have been personally against acceptance of 'single' or 'dating' ads -- so have many other top execs. We have a strong feeling of 'we are our brother's keeper.' We're in an area with about a third of the population 65 and older -- many widowed and lonely; also many young singles. Afraid of 'emotional' or financial 'rip-off' schemes and blue beards. Now we are weakening. People can and do get ripped off anywhere. And, if you meet someone in a 'bar or church' tonight do you know anymore about them than you would if you met through the mail?

On the other hand, the Baton Rouge paper accepts personal ads under heading "People Meeting People." Says the ad manager:

> We are a conservative, religious community and hesitated to run People Meeting People. We had some requests from people who were tired of the bar scene and wanted to meet new people. We felt that we could do a community service

> by providing the opportunity to advertise, so started it a couple of years ago. I have never received a complaint and have refused very few because of copy. We don't run very many ads, but almost every day there are one or two. We plan to continue this classification. We do not run escort ads at all.

The Chicago Tribune began its "Only Hearts" section in September 1983 as a readership tool and now runs 150 to 200 a week. Guidelines include: mail-in only, prepaid only; no homosexual advertising; no lewd or questionable wording; no spouse swapping; singles only; no "recently separated;" nothing kinky; nothing derogatory; no travel companions, business deals, offers of housing or gold diggers."

## DISCUSSION

The conclusion: most of the newspapers responding to this survey do run personal ads and most will accept ads from individuals seeking dates/mates. That is the main finding. But what does it mean?

It means that the fast sister of the print media, newspapers, are indeed mirroring a trend by the slow sister, magazines. This in itself is an interesting finding if one believes that the mediums are used very differently, magazines considered a trusted friend, invited into the home, a source of ideas, read and saved; the newspaper as a disposable source of events, wanted and awaited but scanned and disposed.

It also means that newspaper consumers of the mid-1980s are using their daily newspaper for more basic needs than used appliances, auto tires, milk sales and department store bargains. In many parts of the country, some are using the newspaper, often considered to be a local institution, as a replacement for the recognized social institutions that evidently, for some, no longer fill the needs of meeting friends/companions/lovers/flings.

On the one hand, it all makes sense that advertisements right in

one's community, close to home, on a daily not monthly basis, would provide a forum for individuals of various interestes, backgrounds and persuasions to seek out like-minded company.

On the other hand, given the nation's admitted recent swing to conservatism, including a return to religion as noted in a recent Gallup Poll, it seems odd to find such ads, particularly those for "escort" services.

While it will be difficult to assess who really is using and answering the newspaper ads as it has been for magazines, it seems likely to project that as long as society remains as complex and complicated, and our lives continue to revolve around a fast-paced but stone-faced daily existence, these new "little ads" will continue to grow in use.

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PERSONAL CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING SURVEY

School of Journalism

"Personal" classified ads currently run in our paper. Yes No

If not, why? _____ Against advertising policy
_____ No demand
_____ Other:_____
_____

_____ Have run in past but not now

Personal classifieds have _____increased _____ decreased _____ stayed the same in quantity. The change has been mostly since _____ (year).

What kinds of personals currently run in your paper?

_____ Seeking dates/mates
_____ "Escort" services
_____ Bingo and games
_____ Dating clubs, services
_____ Psychics, palmists, etc.
_____ Religious (thanks, groups)
_____ Other_____
Other_____
Other_____

What is the largest category?

Does your paper have special "personal classifieds" policies/rules? Yes No

If yes, describe or attach policy, please:_____
_____

Under what heading(s) do you run personals?

_____ Personals
_____ Mates/Dates/etc. (Specify:_____)
_____ Information
_____ Happy Ads
_____ Services

Do you require prepayment of personal classifieds? Yes No
Do you require prepayment of other classifieds? Yes No

Are personal classifieds the same rate as other classifieds?
Yes More Less

Has your paper rejected any personals? Yes No
If yes, why?_____

Have you received any complaints from community groups/individuals about running personal classifieds? Yes No
If yes, from whom? _____
Why?_____

Perhaps the most enlightening information is your own insights or comments about personal classifieds and any trends you've noticed. Please provide any comments on the back.

Copies of the newspaper will arrive under separate cover. Yes No
Send me a copy of the results. Yes No

Name _____

Title_____

Newspaper _____

Address_____

City_____State_____Zip_____

About your newspaper:

Circulation _____
A.M. or P.M.
Circle one: Republican Democrat Independent
Chain or Family or Other_____
JOA ( yes no ) with _____
Combination rate package? Yes No
Year established _____
Average daily pages _____
Ratio advertising _____%

Thanks so much for your time.